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Bowles. A letter to Lord Byron. 1821

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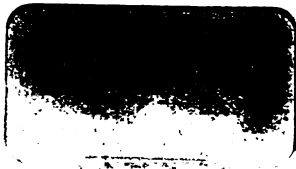


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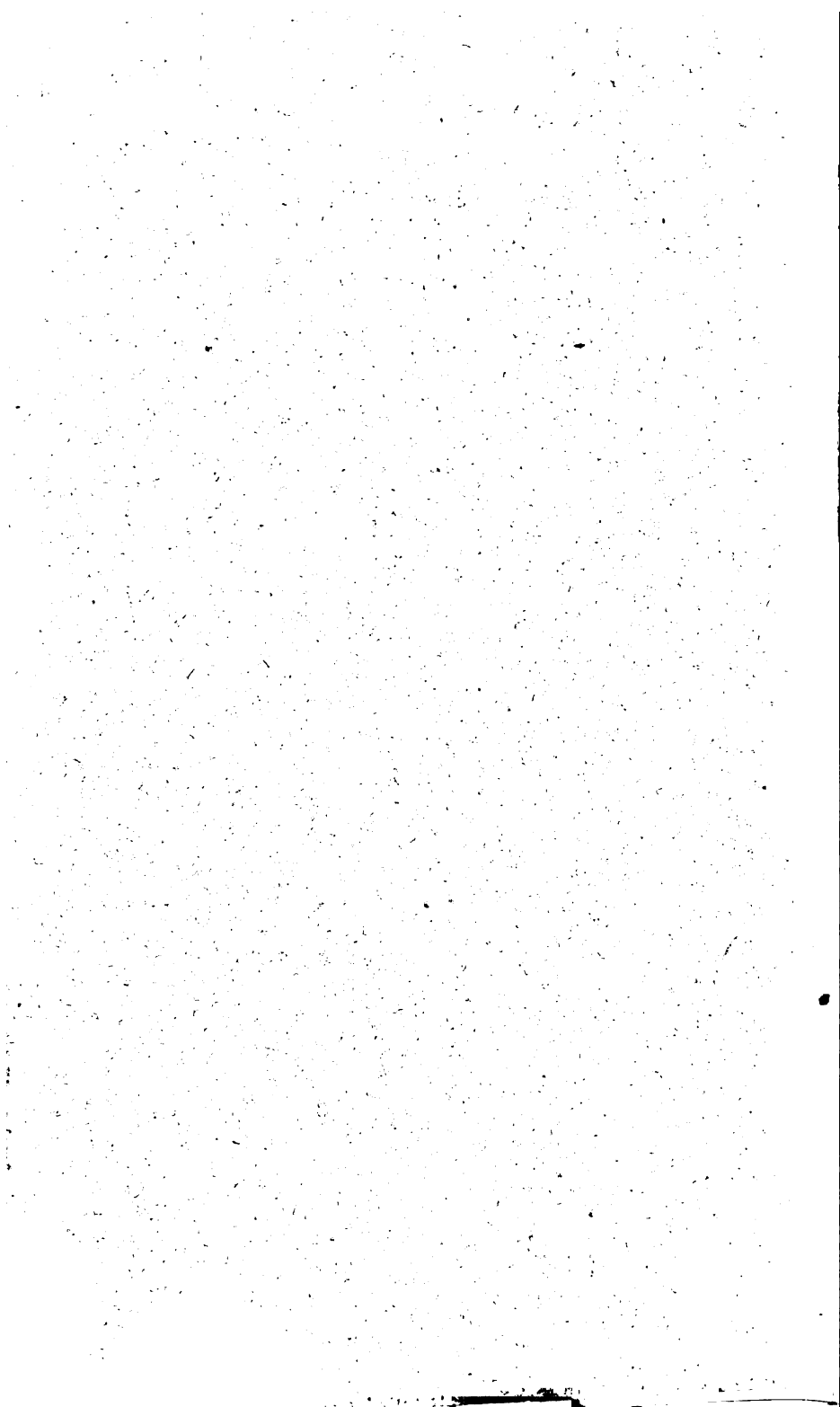
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(Class of 1890)**

FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE



March



o

A

LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HON. LORD BYRON,

Protesting against the immolation

OF

GRAY, COWPER, & CAMPBELL,

AT THE

SHRINE OF POPE.

Hic, dum sublimes versus ructatur, et errat.

Hor.

London :

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1821.

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LETTER

TO THE

RIGHT HON. LORD BYRON.

MY LORD,

YOUR "Letter on the Rev. W. L. Bowles's Strictures" is not the least poetical of your works. The impassioned vindication of the poesy with which genius can surround all works in which the all-interesting mind of man can be employed, does no less honour to your feelings as a man, than to your taste as a poet. But disputants ever caricature the faults and burlesque the beauties of their antagonists, at the same time that they shade the defects and emblazon the merits of their friends. Your Lordship's chivalrous and enthusiastic zeal for Pope's character has led

you to mistake principles and to misrepresent conduct. Your generosity engaged you to become the advocate of Pope, and your ardent in the cause of your client suggested what he required, not what truth and reason warranted. With the fervour of a poet too, you persuaded yourself that forcible statement and clear illustration were proofs of undoubted truth and unequivocal justice. Your defence of Pope's moral character I admit to be as just as it is manly. Your picture of English *court* possesses a moral truth and grandeur that shrivels up at once every fool's face that looks upon it. You depart from truth, and nature, and poetry, when you represent Gray's Odes as encumbrances on the glory of his Elegy, and all your subsequent criticism is perverse and unjust. My reasons I shall assign with all the freedom, which, as a poet and, as a critic, you invite.

Were I to depreciate the Elegy, I should be guilty of the offence which I censure. Your Lordship justly denounces the perverse

pedantry of admiring poetry according to its classification, and yet in the same page you prefer the Elegy to the Odes. Why? only to prepare for a vigorous defence of the "Elegy on an unfortunate Lady," or the "Essay on Man." I venture to say in the name of all disinterested lovers of poetry, that the sublime, impassioned, high-finished poetry, of the "Progress of Poesy," is as far superior to the "Elegy," as the "Pleasures of Hope" is superior to "Blair's Sermons." Lord Byron, when he is not making a case for the "Essay on Man," would be the best of judges on the subject. I abstain from quoting from an ode so rapturous and so impressed on every poetic mind; but when you, my Lord, even in the character of an advocate for Pope, called the Elegy "the corner-stone of Gray's glory," did you recollect the ode on Eton College?

The stings of falsehood those shall try,
 And hard unkindness' alter'd eye,
 That mocks the tear it forc'd to flow;
 And keen remorse, with blood defil'd,
 And moody madness, laughing wild
 Amid severest woe.

Surely the enamoured enthusiast of ethical poetry cannot place lines like these below the "Elegy." But the bold and bullying paradox which insensibly led your Lordship to calumniate Virgil, Milton, Cowper, and Poetry, I must transcribe: "In my mind, the highest of all poetry is ethical poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth."---"In my mind, the ethical is the highest of all poetry, because it does that in *verse*, which the greatest of men have wished to accomplish in *prose*." W. L. Bowles must envy the talent which such flings indicate. If, in defence of his creed, he can ever have occasion to invoke ingenuity to supply the place of truth, and assertion to appear equivalent to reason, he may find a model of high authority. What is moral truth, my Lord? Suppose me not petulantly to ask the question, but really consider how various and prosaic the theories upon that subject are, and allow that with poetry they are but slightly connected. A version of the decalogue in metre is but ordinary poetry. You have

confidently appealed to J sus Christ and to Socrates as standards in prose, but surely your Lordship is aware that they have left no writings poetical or prosaic. "He that drives fat oxen must himself be fat." Architecture must be the highest of all arts, as the highest of all artificial objects are church-spires. There have been histories of England in verse, but I believe they are superseded by Hume's prose. The finest execution by Pope of the civil wars of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, would never equal the prose of Tacitus.

The sublimity, poetry, and imposing awfulness of moral excellence, every susceptible and honest mind will admit and feel, but where in the writings of Pope am I to find the living image of this excellence? Nestor is a good old man, Evander is exquisitely simple and affectionate, Albert gives the authority of age to the warmest feelings of the youthful bosom, and the soul is destitute of feeling that sympathizes not in the wild despair of Outilissi. In the writings of Pope I look in vain for the genuine operation of feeling,---for the

honest movements of the heart,---for the real voice of nature,---for the true language of passion. All these appear in Pope like the image of the snow-clad trees in the icy lake. I desire not to depreciate Pope; I read him, repeat him, and value him. The proverbs, aphorisms, and superficial remarks of life were never more elegantly rendered in verse. It is only your Lordship, by carrying him to a height which he is quite unable to bear, that can occasion his sinking below his just and appropriate level. "Ethical poetry requires more mind, more wisdom, more power, than all the forests that ever were walked, and all the epics that ever were founded upon fields of battle." Lucan founded his poetry on battles, and hence he offered his own mother as a ransom for his life; Epicharis, having more mind, more wisdom, more power, chose to strangle herself rather than betray persons unconnected with her and almost unknown to her. Will your Lordship say that she was capable of writing better ethical poetry? But your Lordship means the power, wisdom, and mind, for

writing elegant rhymes on ethical rules. If so, I have only to say that your Lordship's taste is singular. I have no doubt at all that the ethical persons who walk, or are carried, along the streets of London, derive more comfort, ease, and ethical accommodation, from coarse and vulgar paviers than from the admired and celebrated architects of St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey; and hence your Lordship may assert that the former have more mind, more wisdom, and more power; but, alas! the world will not believe you, my Lord. I am feelingly alive to the charms of verse in matters which it may be convenient to commit to memory.

Here then we rest: "the universal cause
 "Apts to one end, but acts by various laws."
 In all the madness of superfluous health,
 The train of pride, the impudence of wealth,
 Let this great truth be present night and day,
 But most be present if we preach or pray.
 From *o* are formed *am* and *em*,
 From *i*, *ram*, *rim*, *ro*, *sse* and *ssem*.
U, *us*, and *rus*, are formed from *um*.
 All other parts from *re* do come;
 As *ham*, *bo*, *rem*, *a*, *e*, and *i*,
Ns and *dus*, *dum*, *do*, and *di*.

This is ethical poetry, the highest of all poetry, because it does that in verse which the greatest of men have wished to accomplish in prose.

You hurry yourself, my Lord, into a very reasonable but not a very classical fury, in order to pronounce the Georgics a finer poem than the *Eneid*. The same doctrine is most religiously inculcated in the "Lime-street sermons," but begging your Lordship's pardon, and also that of the Lime-street sermon-makers, the world will ever think the *Eneid* the finer poem.

Indulge ordinibus : nec secius omnis in unguem
Arboribus positis secto via limite quadret.

May I translate the first two words in these your favourite lines? "Pray permit the privileged orders to have their own way." But even your Lordship's privileged judgment will not take Milton's comparative estimate of his *Paradise Regained*, or Cowper's comparative estimate of his translation of Homer; why then should you cite the idle tale of

Virgil's preference of the Georgics as authentic and decisive? Let me honestly confess my suspicions that your Lordship never read any part of the Georgics, save the episodes, more than once, and that you dart at the refreshing poetry of the episodes as eagerly as the traveller in the sandy deserts of Arabia at the green islands of palm trees and bounding waters. The episodes in the Georgics are too splendid for any feeble epithets of praise, but will your Lordship stake your credit as a critic that the tale of Euridice is finer in its execution, or more affecting in its sentiments, than the glowing story of Nisus and Euryalus? It is not necessary for my purpose even to glance at the grossness of several passages in the Georgics. The desperate effort to place the Georgics above the Eneid--*imponere Petio Ossam*---is a plain avowal of the relative rank of Pope. Most strange, however, is the flight of your Lordship from the Georgics to the line of your ethical versifier,

“ The proper study of mankind is man.”

Is man a clod, an ox, or an asp? But thus even the genius of Lord Byron flounders in shallow water.

In the next paragraph we are assured that "imagination" and "invention," are the two commonest of qualities. My Lord, this looks like bitter irony of Pope. Had your "illustrious and unrivalled poet" no imagination or invention? The Irish peasant feels mighty inspiration from whiskey, but is the Scotch peasant a stranger to its inventive influence? "The rank of Burns is the very first of his art." Yet he would "taste the barley-bree." Here, whiskey must suffer for the sake of Pope's ethics; elsewhere ethical and candid negus must be anathematized to save Pope's poetry. He is but "a *soi-disant* poet of this day," who is fed with bread and butter during the operation of dictating verses. It is but an Irish peasant that drinks whiskey. Ethical poetry, the highest of all poetry, is inspired by something half-way between butter and whiskey.

Lucretius has indeed given us a very superior poem; his "imagination," his "invention," his allusions, digressions, and illustrations are passionate, poetical, and powerful; as far superior to Pope's "ethics," as the storm that convulses the forest to the blasts of a pair of bellows. The moral of Lucretius is, at least as true and as practical and as ethical as Pope's. How can you, my Lord, charge Lucretius with having ruined his poetry by his ethics? His system of cosmogony may be as unphilosophical as Pope's optimism is puerile, but surely he enforces all the great duties of morality with as much orthodoxy as Pope.

Here I must break in upon the natural order of the subject, in order to offer a remark or two upon some suspicious propositions of your Lordship. Milton is charged with absurdity and blasphemy for his use of cannons, lightnings, and thunders. I am afraid this too is for the sake of Pope. The truth is, that Milton is ravishingly poetical, on earth or in

hell, but in heaven he drops his wings and sleeps. When he is conversant with human or hellish affairs, he feels and communicates all the inspiration of genius, nature, and life; when he is impelled by faith into "ethical poetry or didactic poetry," he becomes dull and uninteresting, and we willingly find fault with every thing he does or sings. Homer, Virgil, and Milton, can easily carry our fancies and our sympathies to the realms below; we know that there are deep caverns in the earth and unfathomable depths in the sea; but upwards we cannot go beyond the summit of Olympus; we can only fix our eyes on vacancy till they are closed in dark clouds of slumber. This it is, my Lord, that renders all Milton's cannons, and warfare, and bustle, above the Empyrean devoid of poetical spirit.

Your criticism on the bust of Antinous is curiously perverse. "Can there be more poetry gathered into existence than in that wonderful creation of perfect beauty? But the poetry of this bust is in no respect derived

from nature, nor from any association of moral exaltedness." But from what is the poetry derived? The same execution, supernatural, super-artificial, might have been applied to the figure of an ass or a monkey. Pray, does your Lordship think that any execution could gather into such a figure all the poetry in existence? No, you cannot be so absurd and blasphemous even for the sake of Pope. Without the magic of the mind no poetry ever existed. The mind, its feelings, its passions, its associations, is the whole of poetry. Descriptions of nature are poetical in proportion as they suggest, by memory or association, warm feelings to the mind; artificial objects, by becoming interwoven with the memory of the minds that lived in ancient times of renown, or by exciting sensations of alarm or sympathy for minds imagined to be exposed to distress and danger, often possess greater poetical interest than the grandest objects in nature. The bust of Antinous is poetical, because its perfect beauty

and symmetry impress upon the spectator the perfect loveliness of a mind corresponding to the external form. The bust is therefore more sublime than a mountain, but no power of a poet, or magician, can "imbue a pack of cards with more poetry than inhabit the forests of America." As if conscious that nothing could serve your Lordship's purpose but thorough swaggering, you lustily swear, that "a silken purse can be made of a sow's ear." Then, by way of atonement to the dignity of proverbs, you add that "a good workman will not find fault with his tools." There is some difference, however, between a workman's *materials* and his *tools*. Pope's poetical tools cannot be found fault with; his materials alone are in fault, and therefore the proverb on that point must have the lie from your Lordship, while the proverb on the other is happily sanctioned.

It is only in deep, serious, and natural agitations of the mind, that we can possibly

sympathize. It was "the little scudding vessels contending with the giant element," which struck your Lordship as poetical. Yet the calm sea and the tranquil Turkish craft, are the *ethical* characteristics of the scene. Could not almighty execution imbue the paper-boats of boys with more poetry than inhabited the Turkish craft running, it might be, for eternity? No, my Lord, this extravagance can do no service to Pope. It is the intoxicating witchery of the tender feelings,—it is the fearful agitation of overwhelming danger,---it is the irresistible swell of natural passion---it is the vivid representation of objects naturally and powerfully interesting,---that really carries the mind beyond the prosaic calm of ethics and indifference, and gives poetical delight. A stop-bason and another vase are used by the greatest of men, but they are far more ethical and less poetical than a wine-cup, for the wine-cup is intimately associated with human passions. Hence tragedy is really and indisputably the very highest order of poetry, but it is not the tragedy of Hughes, or

Fenton, or Addison. It is utterly unworthy of your Lordship, to confound success in Drury-lane with the highest poetical merit.

Your Lordship's magnanimity and bounty in claiming the highest ranks in poetry to Petrarch, the sonneteer, and Burns, the tale-teller, are worthy of unbounded praise. In this deed of chivalry you are unquestionably as just as you are generous. Had Dryden written but the one ode, he would have ranked as the first of poets; because that ode has all the impassioned interest of tragedy. Had Cowper written but the verses on his mother's picture, every human heart (not destitute of sensibility, or furiously chivalrous for Pope) would own him, love him, and live with him, as the softest, sweetest, wildest votary of pathetic poetry. But, for Cowper, your Lordship has no charity. You challenge "any one to deny, that three lines addressed by Cowper to his nurse, are eminently poetical and pathetic;" yet, you say, "Cowper is no poet." Jesus Christ may have his place by

Socrates, to support Pope; for suicidal Cowper, no helper is found.

Barbarous, beyond the license of a poet's criticism, is your Lordship's thrust at (the most delicate, sensitive, pure, and holy being) that ever delighted the world with enthusiastic song. It is mortifying to the admirers of genius, that Lord Byron (in the veriest wantonness of zeal for Pope) could make a sneering allusion to the deranged sensibility which prompted Cowper to attempt suicide. Let not be so ungenerous as to retort upon a peer of England, himself a poet, who never knew the severest struggles of merit, accusing Cowper of courting a sinecure. Such a cold-blooded insult to merit in humble station, would have better become a pensioned representative of a Scotch county, or a secretary of state for Ireland. Let not the purity of Cowper be sullied by a defence of his connexion with Mrs. Unwin; it was no judicious kindness for Pope, that suggested to your Lordship a justification so utterly inapplica-

ble. The charities of Cowper were as liberal and delicate as poetical sensibility, and the tenderest humanity, could render them. In religion, there is no room for comparison. Let Pope be as tolerant and pious as your Lordship may choose, Cowper was sublimely, awfully religious. He who (from prejudice, intolerance, or dogmatism) can see no grandeur and poetry in the religious madness of Cowper, is to be pitied—even if he were Lord Byron. Is not the faithful representation of the finest of human minds agitated by gloomiest horrors, or wildest joys, more poetical than all the associations of a pack of cards?

Look where he comes ;—in this embowered alcove,
Stand close concealed, and see a statue move :
Lips busy, and eyes fixt, foot falling slow,
Arms hanging idly down, hands clasped below,
Interpret to the marking eye distress,
Such as its symptoms can alone express.
That tongue is silent now ; that silent tongue
Could argue once, could jest or join the song.
Man is a harp, whose chords elude the sight,
Each yielding harmony, disposed aright ;

The screws reversed (a task, which if he please,
 God in a moment executes with ease)
 Ten thousand thousand strings at once go loose,
 Lost, till he tune them all their power and use.

* * * * *

It is no common characteristic of a general that every individual in his army should think of him in the hour of battle. Even Cæsar announced his name ere the mariners felt the inspiration of his presence. Who can read the bewitching "Task," or any of the minor works of the graphic poet, without *feeling* the presence and the power of Wm. Cowper? Your Lordship's poetry derives much of its effect from your address in identifying yourself with your writings. Be content, notwithstanding, to be far inferior to Cowper, for he is indeed inimitable.

Your Lordship ought to have disdained to imitate the gabbling criticism of Miss Seward on Cowper's translation of Homer. If it were incomparably inferior to Pope's, it could afford but an equivocal criterion of their com-

parative merits as original poets. But, in fact, they are not to be compared. Cowper's translation can please only the reader and admirer of Homer. Pope's version may well delight the mere English scholar. That children should read it with rapture, is natural; and it is not unnatural, that the prejudices of childhood should bias the matured judgment. But none who are familiarly acquainted with Homer's Greek can ever read Pope's version for the first time. Your Lordship might, perhaps, by diligent inquiry, find, that many human beings (thoroughly acquainted with Homer) have read and admired Cowper's faithful and harmonious translation.

Your Lordship's disposition to sacrifice your own poetical existence to the fame of Pope, is somewhat alarming. In your case, I protest against the license:

——— "sit jus, liceatque perire poetis."

This is worthy of the parental part which you have undertaken to perform for Pope. Your

allusion to Babel, has called my attention to the Bible, where I find a poet of illustrious rank, and chivalrous feelings, lamenting that he had not perished, rather than an artificial, unnatural, profligate person, whom he had been anxiously desirous of protecting:—

My Absalom! (the voice of nature cried :)
 Oh! that for thee thy father could have died!
 For bloody was the deed, and rashly done,
 That slew my Absalom! my son, my son!*

But, for God's sake! my Lord, forbear “to attempt the most atrocious of crimes in the Christian code.” Live for ever, O bard! and live Pope too!

But it is not generous in your Lordship, nor yet just, to sacrifice all your cotemporaries to the angry *manes* of Pope. There is,

* Musing on days when yet the guiltless boy
 Smil'd on his sire, and fill'd his heart with joy.

Lord Byron, when a boy, read Pope's *Homer* with rapture,

at least, one living poet, who is as far superior to Pope, both in the "thoughts that breathe and words that burn," as Pope is superior to Tickell. I accuse not your Lordship of envy; your pride of genius must spurn the approach of a passion so humiliating. Tell us then what part of Pope's writings would supply the divinity that breathes and speaks in every line of "O'Connor's child?" Will posterity, indeed, prefer the "Eloisa" to "Gerturde"---the "Rape of the Lock" to the "Exile of Erin"---and the "Essay on Man" to the "Pleasures of Hope?" Pope was a poet, and he possessed one eminent and rare claim to the title: he knew how to touch, retouch, polish, alter, and improve every line, till it was highly finished. It is not the selection of the individual, Antinous, but the perfect execution that has "gathered into existence the poetry of the bust." In the present age, your Lordship knows, that there is only one poet who finishes;---and his finishing, like his genius, is far superior to Pope's. The very nicest execution will never convert

a "shilling" into a "paradise," or a pack of cards into a living army. But, where the subject is great and interesting, exquisite polish will more than double its grandeur and its interest. It is only the refined delicacy of genius that can give the mighty eloquence of complete execution. Pope finished with great skill, and with unquestionable genius, but all his subjects are unpoetical. The great living poet to whom I allude, has chosen his subjects with as much felicity as he has exquisitely finished every line he has written.

Mighty, indeed, would be the benefit conferred on society, by sweeping from the fields of poetry the rank mushrooms, which have been produced with far greater rapidity, and far less labour, than decrees in chancery. Even your Lordship might have greatly improved your own merit and fame, as well as increased the gratification of your sincerest admirers, by being a little more laborious.

Your Lordship's saintly lamentations over a declining age, and your more than puritanical.

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Your Lordship's saintly lamentations over a declining age, and your more than puritanical.

Your charge of plagiarism against Mr. Campbell is invidious, and unworthy of your Lordship.

“ As yon summits, soft and fair,
Clad in colours of the air,
Which to those who journey near
Barren, brown, and rough appear,
Still we tread the same coarse way—
The present's still a cloudy day.”

“ Is not this,” you ask, “ the original of the far-famed—”

“ 'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view,
And robes the mountain in its azure hue?”

The question, my Lord, might well admit of a negative answer, but if the six lines had been the original of the majestic two, it was the glance of the poet's eye that gave the enchantment to the far-famed lines.

Lucretius writes:

“ At jam non domus accipiet te læta : neque uxor
Optima, nec dulces occurrent oscula nati
Præripere ; et tacita pectus dulcedine tangant.”

Is not this the original of the touching lines :

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care ;
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the env'y'd kiss to share ?

Your Lordship has styled the Elegy "the corner-stone of Gray's glory," and the above lines are indisputably the finest ethical image in the poem, yet far be it from me to think less of the merit of the elegy because I find this accidental coincidence or unconscious translation. Surely a poet will never depreciate Virgil for the living beauty he bestowed on incidents which he had found in Homer.

In Pliny's Panegyric, I find a most eloquent account of the expulsion of spies from human society. They were committed, not to steeds bound for the desert, but to ships left to the caprice of the winds of heaven and the waves of the sea; they flung back their curses, and the multitude on the shore were loud in their joy. Who would not deride with contemptuous

indignation the attempt to depreciate your Lordship's characteristic lines as borrowed from Pliny?

"The last of human sounds which rose,
As I was darted from my foes,
Was the wild shout of savage laughter,
Which on the wind came roaring after,
A moment from that rabble-rout:
With sudden wrath I wrench'd my head,
And snapp'd the cord, which to the mane
Had bound my neck in lieu of rein,
And writhing half my form about,
Howl'd back my curse."

Virgil writes ;---

"Spem vultu similat, premit altum corde dolorem."

Is this the original of,---

"To force of cheer a greater show
And seem above both wounds and woe?"

Dr. Johnson's "London" contains the
couplet ;---

"And fix'd on Cambria's solitary shore,
Give to St. David one true Briton more."

Is this the original of,---

"One freeman more, America, to thee?"

**Deranged and unpoetical Cowper addresses
Liberty ;—**

“ Incomparable gem ! thy worth untold ;
Cheap, though blood-bought ; and thrown away when sold.”

Does your Lordship descend to an imitation of Cowper, the translator of Homer, when you write,—

“ whose red right-hands have bought
Rights, cheaply earn'd with blood ?”

But I shall not remark further upon a species of criticism more becoming the character of Zoilus than your Lordship's. You are eloquent and convincing when you vindicate the poetry of mighty productions of genius and art, whether presented to our view or recalled by association to our memory ; you do great discredit to your own temper and taste, when you affect to find no poetry in Cowper and endeavour to question the originality of Campbell. Pope requires not the sacrifice which your Lordship would offer. Horace's satires and epistles would

have derived no benefit from the destruction of Virgil's poetry. In "the dead language" of those unrivalled poets, the wit, and wisdom, and *ethics* of Horace are studied with intense delight, but far higher is the delight with which we read the pathetic dreams of Dido, the fervent but unavailing prayers of Evander, and the frantic exclamations of the agonized mother of Euryalus. Posterity will admire the elegance, the spirit, and the wit of Pope, but they will weep with "Conrad," and delight in the holiest sympathy with "O'Connor's pale and lovely child." When the *Epistles* of Horace shall cease to excite attention, and give delight by felicity of expression and familiarity of description, on human character and conduct, then, but not till then, will the writings of Cowper become uninteresting. In Cowper's personal character we feel much of the interest that is excited by the most poetical of persons :---

" I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward ; and, to deal plainly,
I fear, I am not in my perfect mind."

Poor Ophelia—

“ Divided from herself and her fair judgment,”

does not on that account affect us less by her poetry. Who delights not to “ wheel the sofa round,” and converse with the bard of Olney? Who can see him feeding his hares in the evening, or hear him—

“ Sighing say,

“ I knew at least one hare that had a friend.”

without feeling emotions of no ordinary nature?

Collins was a poet, and yet the most poetical words he ever uttered are: “ I have but one book, but that is the best.” The heart of an intelligent and honest reader is a more correct critic than the proudest idol of popular applause, and the heart of such a reader will repose with delight on the pages of Cowper, in defiance of all the laws and decisions of the favoured poets of the present day.

Zoilus might have said, that **Homer** lived at a happy time for his fame; and, leaving no monument of his mind but his criticism, might be too much despised to be execrated. I believe your Lordship pronounced Cowper no poet, not in the insolence of rank or fame, but because you regarded only the rank and fame of Pope: believing so, I am confident you will be ready to do justice to Cowper, when your professional duty can leave you at liberty to act worthily of your poetical renown.

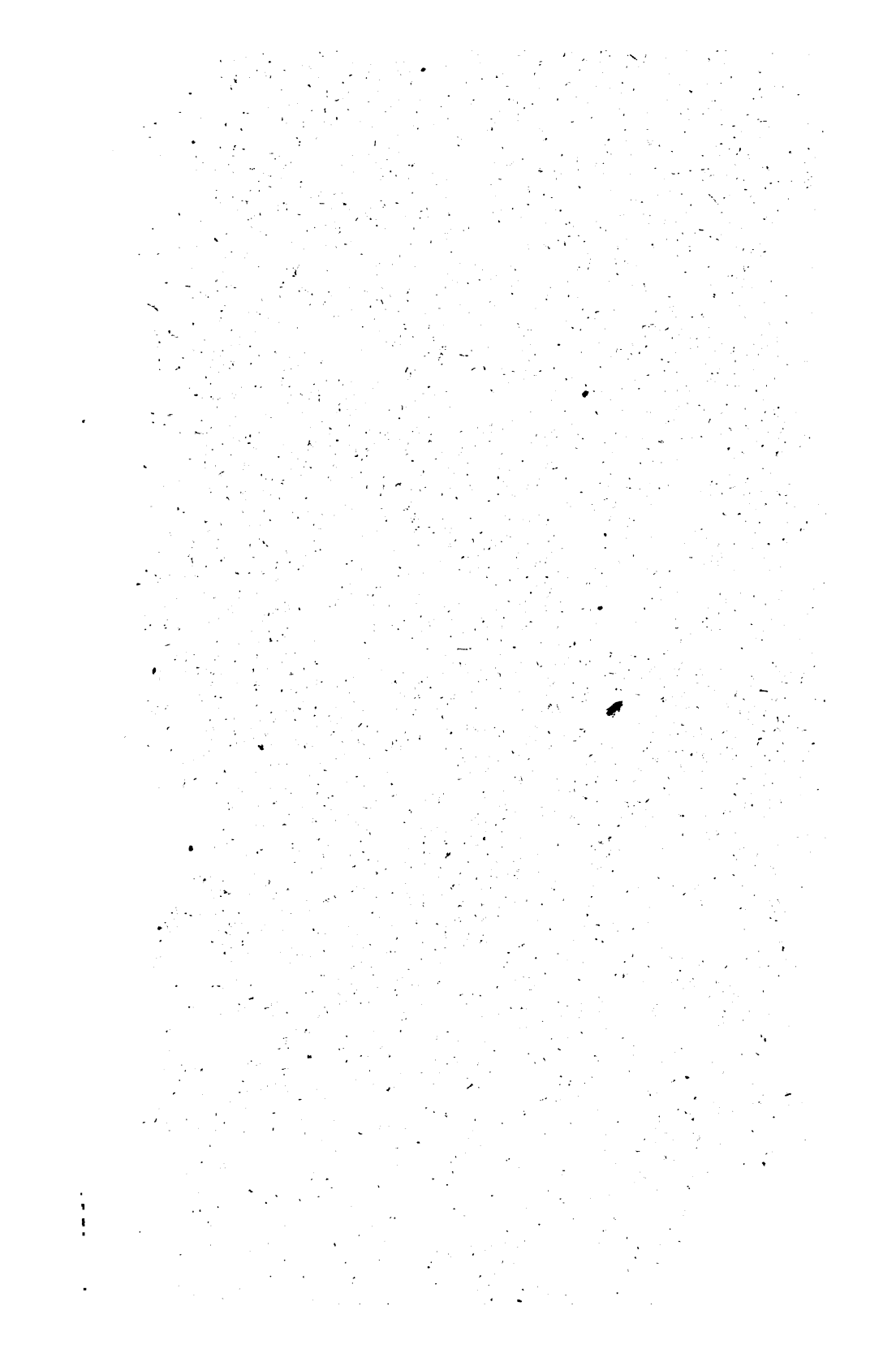
I am,

My LORD,

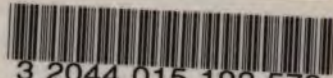
Your Lordship's very humble servant,

FABIUS.

THE END.







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